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Nations in Prophecy

Babylon

FIFTY MILES SOUTH of Baghdad, in what is now the southern part of modern Iraq, lie the ruins of Babylon, the city first founded by Nimrod the mighty hunter. The first book of the Bible tells us that *'Cush begat Nimrod...He was a mighty hunter before the LORD...And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel (Babylon)...in the land of Shinar'* (Sumeria later known as Babylonia). [Genesis 10.8-10]

Babylon was later to become the chief city of both the former and latter Babylonian empires. For the greater part of her long history, foreign invaders have ruled Babylonia. These invaders however, readily submitted to their victim's superior civilization. Even in defeat, Babylonia's spiritual primacy and leadership continued to hold sway. Babylonian scholars developed early science and astrology. They invented an early form of writing known as Cuneiform. Their mathematicians devised a system of counting based on the number 60, from which we get the number of minutes in an hour and the degrees in a circle ($60 \times 6 = 360$ degrees).

The earlier empire seems to have been the embryonic foundation for the later empire. Although over 1,000 years was to elapse before Babylon re-emerged as a great power, much of the former civilization had remained in place and the second empire was able to pick up, more or less, where the old empire had left off.

BABYLON, ASSYRIA AND ISRAEL

Israel's connection with the region of Mesopotamia or Chaldea (the central heartland of Babylon) goes back almost to 2,000 years BC, to the time when Terah (Abraham's father) and his family lived in the rich and splendid southern Mesopotamian city of Ur on the River Euphrates. Having lived there

for many years, the family moved to Haran several hundred miles to the northwest. The record in Genesis tells us that '*...Terah took Abram (Abraham) his son...and they went forth...from Ur of the Chaldees...and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there.*' [Genesis 11.31]

It was here that Abraham received a call from God and the promise to make him the founder of the Hebrew nation:

'...And I will make of thee a great nation...and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed...and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran...and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan...' [Genesis 12.1-5]

Abraham obeyed the call and from then on he lived as a nomad, moving from place to place with his family, flocks and herds, until famine drove him south into Egypt. This established the first link with a nation that would play a major part in Israel's history and emancipation. From there he returned to Canaan, the land God promised to give to his descendants. From this early beginning the nation of Israel was to eventually arise and occupy its homeland.

During the reign of Solomon, its third king, Israel reached the zenith of its power and influence. Shortly after Solomon's death the nation divided into the northern (ten tribe) kingdom of Israel and the southern (two tribe) kingdom of Judah. Its golden age of wealth and political jurisdiction was now all but over. Through a long and troubled history, the two kingdoms, often at odds with each other, were to become little more than vassal provinces to the mighty Assyrian empire. In 721 BC Assyria finally lost patience with the waywardness of Israel and despoiled Samaria, its capital city, carrying off the population into exile and so destroyed the northern kingdom dispersing its ten tribes.

In turn Judah was to suffer greatly under the Assyrian yoke and only by the direct intervention of God, during the reign of Hezekiah, was the siege of Jerusalem halted and the city saved. Like so many empires before and since, Assyria overstretched itself and the effort required controlling its borders began to take its toll. As is so often the case, the enemy came from within and struck at the very heartland of its existence. In 626 BC

Nabopolassar, a regional governor of the area around the Persian Gulf, having won independence for Babylon the previous year, was made king. Fourteen years later the Babylonians and Medes captured the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The Assyrians retreated to Haran (the city where Abraham received his call from God) but were soon driven out. Not content with taking over Assyria itself, the Babylonians set out to conquer the whole Assyrian Empire. The Egyptians, in a show of strength, marched north to meet the anticipated threat these changing circumstances might present to their own country. King Josiah of Judah chose to intercept the Egyptians at Megiddo. In the resulting battle he was killed and Judah became subject to Egypt. With the death of Josiah (Judah's last good king) any hope that Judah could avoid a similar fate to that which befell Israel was effectively lost.



The Babylonian Empire 585 BC

In 605 BC, the Babylonian army led by the new king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar (son of Nabopolassar), defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish. The Babylonian Empire was spreading. Judah was one of many countries that now had to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar. After a further fierce battle between the Egyptians and Babylonians, Egypt encouraged Judah to rebel.

Nebuchadnezzar sent troops to crush the rebellion and in 597 BC Judah submitted. Babylonian policy was not just to plunder and destroy, but also to weaken the subject nations and prevent further rebellions by deporting their leading citizens. The king (Jehoiachin) and many of Judah's most important subjects (including Daniel and Ezekiel) were taken into exile in Babylon. Despite this, ten years later Zedekiah, a puppet king placed on the throne of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, appealed to the Egyptians for help. Zedekiah's rebellion brought down on Judah the full weight of Nebuchadnezzar's wrath. Once again the Babylonians invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. The siege lasted eighteen months until finally in 586 BC the city was taken. Zedekiah fled but was captured in the plains of Jericho. The prophet Jeremiah recorded the terrible outcome:

‘...the Chaldeans’ army pursued...and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho...Then the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah...Moreover he put out Zedekiah’s eyes, and bound him with chains, to carry him to Babylon.’ [Jeremiah 39.5-7]

This time Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, the temple treasures taken to Babylon and most of its remaining citizens deported. Only the very poor were left to cultivate the land. Judah, the last bastion of God's chosen people had fallen; its last king captured and blinded; its leading citizens exiled; its spiritual centre destroyed. The warnings of God's prophets had gone unheeded and Babylon's powerful empire now extended from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, an area only marginally smaller than the great Assyrian Empire which it had usurped.

FULFILLED PROPHECIES

The decline and fall of Israel and Judah should be viewed in the overall sense that both kingdoms formed the nation of God. That Israel suffered the humiliation of defeat and exile first was not that Israel was bad (in God's eyes) and that Judah was good, but more a case of Judah being marginally less wicked than Israel during the period of Assyrian dominance. Judah's downfall was the final instalment of a corporate punishment on a nation that had willingly fallen from grace. Judah's hope that with the fall of Assyria her own freedom would be assured, was bitterly disappointed. Assyrian oppression was replaced by the no less severe control of Babylon. Despite the prophet

Jeremiah's insistent demand that Judah should submit to Babylonian authority, and accept their punishment as the will of God, they chose instead, to put their trust in false prophets, weak and foolish kings and in Egypt. The result was that the southern kingdom ceased to exist. Isaiah's prophecy from an earlier period in Judah's history, had been fulfilled:

'And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah...Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house...shall be carried into Babylon.

[2 Kings 20.16,17]

The downfall of Israel and Judah was the direct result of national disobedience to God's will and the continued ignoring of His messengers. Before the exile the prophets warned that judgement was inevitable. Amos and Hosea did so in the northern kingdom in the eighth century, Jeremiah in the southern kingdom in the late seventh century. They called on the people to repent but were forced to realise that they were in no mood to do so. Different prophets exposed various aspects of Israel's sin. Amos spoke against social injustice, Hosea about Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Micah reminded them of the sins of Israel's rulers and Jeremiah, the false gods and the unchecked corruption in Judah. Perhaps the words of Amos best summarise the voice of the prophets. This is God's message spoken at a time when both the northern and southern kingdoms were still in the land:

'I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah...yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.' [Amos 4.11,12]

After Judah as well as Israel had gone into exile, some at least, began to realise that they had deserved this punishment. From this time on, the prophets were able to stir up hope. Ezekiel foresaw a day when the nation, lifeless as a heap of dead bones, would begin to live again as the spirit of God breathed new life into the people. [Ezekiel chapter 37] He looked forward to the rebuilding of the temple and a new settlement of the land. [Ezekiel chapters 40 to 48] The prophecies of Isaiah also brought a message of assurance to the people. [Isaiah chapters 40 to 55]

It is to the book of Jeremiah that the reader should turn for the most complete review of the period leading up to the Babylonian invasion of Judah and beyond to the time of the exile. Arguably the greatest prophet of his day, Jeremiah was to suffer much at the hands of the authorities. His unpalatable warnings meant he was often castigated and reviled by his enemies among whom were many false prophets. Although he was never to join the exiles in captivity, his letter to them was full of good advice, comfort and hope for the future. [*Jeremiah chapter 29*]

It was a hope that they could readily identify with because it prophesied not only their return but also the exact time span of their exile. Thus, they could look forward with assurance to the day when their captivity would come to an end and they could begin the long trek across the desert from Babylonia to their homeland.

‘For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.’

[*Jeremiah 29.10*]



A restored gate at the site of ancient Babylon

NEBUCHADNEZZAR AND DANIEL

With the Egyptians defeated, the rebellion in Judah over and the borders of his empire secure, Nebuchadnezzar could now devote time to the rebuilding and beautifying of Babylon, his capital city. Intending not only to surpass its former glory, but to make it among the greatest cities of the world and thereby a reflection of his personal glory and the greatness of his empire:

‘The king spake...Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?’ [Daniel 4.30]

Babylon was indeed a magnificent city, covering a huge area on either side of the River Euphrates. Stout double brick walls protected both the inner and outer city. Eight great gates led to the inner city that contained fifty temples. The greatest of these was the temple of Marduk, a Sumerian-style ziggurat. The ‘Hanging Gardens’ of Babylon with its terraces on different levels laid out with palms and many other trees and plants, providing colour and shade in a flat land, was one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The Greek historian, Herodotus, described Babylon as the most splendid city in the world. This proud and charismatic monarch, builder of Babylon, was to learn the lesson of the sin of pride. At the very moment of his proud boast, God humbled him as we read in the book of Daniel:

‘While the word was in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee.’ [Daniel 4.31]

For seven years he was to suffer a strange madness, living with the beasts of the field before his sanity returned. [Daniel 4.32,33] When it did, he was a changed man:

‘Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.’ [Daniel 4.37]

A mighty earthly king was humbled, and had the humility to acknowledge it:

‘...I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation.’ [Daniel 4.34]

Having just read about the humbling of a proud man, let us now turn to a humble man who was to be elevated. To do so we have to go to the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign and remind ourselves of a young man who was led away to exile in the first wave of captives to leave Judah, who overcame his new circumstances by sheer courage and faithfulness to God. We are referring of course to Daniel, who having served his apprenticeship as a trainee counsellor, had been accepted to the court of the king. In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar’s spirit was troubled by a mysterious dream ‘and his sleep brake from him.’ [Daniel 2.1]

Daniel’s God-given ability to make known the dream’s content and the interpretation thereof, despite the king being unable to recall his own dream (as he said ‘*The thing is gone from me*’ [Daniel 2.5]), was to elevate Daniel to the position of chief minister:

‘Then the king made Daniel a great man...ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon.’ [Daniel 2.48]

NEBUCHADNEZZAR’S DREAM

Daniel related the dream to the King in these words:

‘Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image...This image’s head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest...a stone...cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet...and brake them to pieces...and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth.’ [Daniel 2.31-35]

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE DREAM

'Thou, O king... art this head of gold.'

Head of Gold = Nebuchadnezzar/Babylon.

'And after thee shall arise another kingdom.'

Breast and arms of Silver = Medo-Persian Empire.

'And another third kingdom of brass.'

Belly and thighs of Bronze = Greek Empire.

'And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron.'

Legs of Iron = Roman Empire.

'... the feet were part of iron and part of clay....but they shall not cleave one to another.'

Feet of Iron and Clay = Divided State.

'And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed...but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands...the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter...' [Daniel 2.37-45]

Stone = Kingdom of God.

At the time of Daniel's interpretation, the emerging empires, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman were still in the realm of prophecy but today are all historical fact. In other words, prophecy has been fulfilled. Approximately 1,500 years has elapsed since the demise of the Roman Empire and no one power has since ruled the world. This then, is prophecy being fulfilled.

THE FUTURE KINGDOM

With the first three stages of Daniel's prophecy a reality and the fourth holding true, we (the Christadelphians) await with confidence the fulfilment of the final stage - the coming of the kingdom of God. The Kingdom will be here on earth, with Jerusalem as its capital and Jesus as its king.

In this short article we have only touched on the wealth of prophecy contained in the Bible. We hope that it has been sufficient to gain your interest to the point you will wish to know more of the great message of the Bible and of God's plan for mankind.

In conclusion, we can be assured that fulfilled prophecy is tangible evidence that our faith is not misplaced. This strengthens our belief that prophecy yet to be fulfilled will surely come to pass. Let us remember that the Bible is God's Word. The prophets were God's messengers, for the Apostle Peter tells us that *'...prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.'* [2 Peter 1.21]

If you are still searching for the truth of God's Word and have an earnest desire to serve Him through Jesus, then please act now before the final stage of Daniel's prophecy comes true, for then it may be too late!

If a pagan king over 2,500 years ago could say *'I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever,'* and who died before Daniel's prophecy came to pass, then what excuse have we, who have seen so much of the prophecy fulfilled, not to do likewise? May the God of heaven and earth guide you in your efforts to learn of the truth *'And...direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.'* [2 Thessalonians 3.5]

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Basic Bible Teaching

Sacrifice

IN CONSIDERING ANY subject it is important at the outset to define the terminology used. The Concise Oxford Dictionary definition of 'sacrifice' implies two distinct shades of meaning:

1. Slaughter of animal, or person, surrender of possession as an offering to a deity.
2. Giving up something for the sake of something else.

The first definition of sacrifice is something that is totally alien in today's so-called enlightened society. However, in Bible times, particularly in Old Testament times, animal sacrifice was an integral part of the worship of God. In New Testament times after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, animal sacrifice had no place in the Christian's approach to God. This was not because sacrifice was no longer important but that the sacrificial work of Jesus in laying down his life was a totally effective, once-and-for-all sacrifice which made the offering of animals an unnecessary ritual.

The second definition of sacrifice given in the opening paragraph, is a concept much more familiar to people today. It is a familiar cry of parents who have gone without certain pleasures in order to provide better things for their children. In this usage of the word, the sense is of giving up something that we value or enjoy in order to give to someone else. We shall see as we progress, that these two aspects of the subject come together in the Old Testament writings. The offerings that were made to God had to be of the very best, something valued and treasured by the giver, as a token of the love and respect the giver showed to God. In a similar way, the Christian concept

is one of self-sacrifice, a giving of ourselves to God's work, when again, only the very best of our efforts will be acceptable.

This article will now trace the scriptural teaching concerning sacrifice as it is presented to us in both Old and New Testaments. Such an exercise is not an academic study of the religious ritual of an ancient civilization. It is a practical illustration of the way in which the Christian should learn to approach God and to serve Him.

THE NEED FOR SACRIFICE

Animal sacrifice is not a practice that man devised, but was ordained by God Himself as an essential requirement for men and women to approach Him acceptably. The reason for this is described in the early chapters of Genesis. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden to tend it and care for it. They enjoyed peaceful and idyllic surroundings with but one restriction placed upon them. This restriction was a test of their obedience to God's clear commandment not to eat the fruit of a particular tree. [Genesis 2.16,17] The punishment for disobeying this clear instruction was equally clear - death. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and in so doing sinned. God was true to His word and man was duly punished for his disobedience. However God, as well as being a God of justice, is also a God of mercy. Although condemning man to die, God also opened up a way for the human race to escape the consequences of sin and live for ever. This process of reconciling men and women to God is the essential message of the Bible and sacrifice is a vital ingredient of that message.

After eating the fruit of the tree, the record tells us that Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover themselves with aprons made of fig leaves. This covering was inadequate and it was God Himself who provided an appropriate covering. This covering was made from the skins of animals. This obviously required that the animals must first be killed and so death, as the consequence of sin, first came within Adam and Eve's experience. [Genesis 3.21]

This simple account of what happened to our first parents reveals some important fundamental principles about the way that God deals with men:

- 1. God required them to demonstrate obedience to His laws of their own freewill.**

2. **The covering they devised for themselves was totally inadequate.**
3. **God provided a covering for their sinful nature.**
4. **This involved the slaying of an animal and the shedding of blood.**

The killing of the animal would impress upon Adam and Eve the punishment that would now come upon them. They too were destined to die because of their disobedience. It was because of their guilt that the animal had to be killed and this would act as a powerful reminder of their true position before God and their need for His mercy and compassion if they were to become acceptable to Him.

The general principles which are outlined above, were later formally incorporated into a very strict code of laws. These were to govern the daily life of the Jewish people. This code has become known as the Law of Moses.

SACRIFICE UNDER THE LAW OF MOSES

Although generally known as the Law of Moses, the various regulations and commandments were not the work of Moses but the revealed will of God. [Exodus 19. 3-7] The terms of the Law were the conditional clauses in a covenant or agreement that God entered into with the nation of Israel. After delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, God gathered all the people to Mount Sinai and there spoke to them through Moses:

‘Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples...and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...’

[Exodus 19. 5,6 RSV]

This promise of God is a very important part of His purpose with the human race. He declared His intention to separate out from all the people in the world a group of men and women who would obey His commands. In Old Testament times these commandments were encapsulated in the Law of Moses, which revealed a code of conduct and morality which if followed, would result in Divine favour and blessing.

The Law covered every single aspect of life and it was impossible for men and women to keep the Law perfectly. The Law made provision for man to recognise his failings and then to approach God to seek forgiveness. Just as in the case of Adam and Eve, this approach to God required the shedding of blood in recognition of divine judgement - that death is the consequence of sin. The weakness of the Law of Moses was that man was continually breaking that Law and therefore repeatedly coming under the curse that the Law contained. Thus there was a continuing need for sacrifices to be offered, sin to be recognised and repented of and divine mercy sought for.

As well as the sin offerings the Law provided for a number of other offerings to be made. Many of these related to services of thanksgiving to God - for example following the ingathering of the harvest, the birth of children etc. In everything the Israelites were reminded of their dependence upon God for the blessings of this life and of the need for mercy, that they might inherit a better life in the future.



Remains of a sacrificial altar at Kasr El - Bint, Petra

THE QUALITY OF THE SACRIFICES

Even a cursory reading of sections of the first five books of the Old Testament shows that the Law very carefully prescribed the types of offerings that were to be made, according to the occasion and the circumstances of the offerer. One aspect of this specification is repeated time after time in the Law. The animal that was to be sacrificed had to be perfect, '*without blemish*'. [*Exodus 12.5, Leviticus 1.3*] This establishes a very important principle in relation to the things we offer to God. The offering must be of the very highest quality. There was no tolerance of the attitude that said 'That animal is superfluous to my needs - it will do for God!' On many occasions during their history Israel was condemned by God for this attitude.

'...if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.' [*Malachi 1.8*]

MORE THAN SACRIFICE IS REQUIRED

The quality of the offering presented to God was important, but so much more important was the quality of the heart that gave it. A simple story from the life of King Saul will illustrate the principle. Saul had been given a clear commandment from God to fight the Amalekites and to utterly destroy them. Saul obeyed God in part but decided not to kill all the livestock that had been taken as booty. Instead of destroying them, he offered the best of the captured flocks as a sacrifice to God. Again, this attitude was roundly condemned by God through His prophet:

'...Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.' [*1Samuel 15.22*]

It was a similar failing that caused Jesus to condemn the Pharisees. They were punctilious about keeping the ritual of the Law, but were often oblivious to the spirit enshrined in the Law. Jesus approved the comment of one of the scribes:

"...you have truly said that he (God) is one...and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." [*Mark 12.32,33 RSV*]

This level of appreciation caused Jesus to say that the scribe was '*not far from the kingdom of God*'. This attitude is the platform from which all sacrifice must be offered. If we love God with all our heart and mind, then we will give Him of our very best. If we love our neighbour as ourselves, then we will share all that we have with him. This brings the consideration of sacrifice and offering firmly into the Christian way of life. We can do no better than to consider Christ's own giving of himself in sacrifice.

CHRIST - THE LASTING SACRIFICE FOR SIN

We have already noted how that in the beginning our first parents sinned by disobeying God's command and as a consequence were condemned to die. This fact clearly suggests that the only possible way to eternal life is through perfect obedience to God's will. It was just such a life that Jesus led - he had a perfect understanding of God's will. That understanding led him to great trial and personal tragedy. But he remained perfectly obedient to the very end. It was this perfect life which ensured that Jesus could be raised from the grave to enjoy eternal life. But Jesus' life of obedience was much more than a personal triumph, it was a triumph in which all of us can share. The sacrifices of the Law of Moses were not effective in permanently covering sin - the animal had no conscious awareness of good or bad. The death of the animal merely reminded the offerer of his own subjection to sin and death and his reliance upon God's mercy. In contrast, the willing offering by Jesus of his life was a perfect sacrifice, a sinless life being freely given for the benefit of others.

The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks at great length about the imperfections of the Law of Moses and contrasts this with the perfection of Christ's offering:

'And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.'

[Hebrews 10.11-14 RSV]

Firstly, there was the necessity of a perfect animal that had to be offered. This essential characteristic of perfection pointed forward to the only sacrifice

that could ever be effective. Jesus was called by John the Baptist, *'the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.'* [John 1.29]

Secondly, the person making the sacrifice had first to recognise his or her fault and then be associated with the death of the animal. The message in New Testament times was exactly the same and is equally valid today: *'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...'* [Acts 2.38]

This was the Christian message proclaimed by Peter on the day of Pentecost. Paul, in writing to the Roman believers, powerfully shows how true Christian baptism by total immersion in water, is a symbolic association of the believer with the death and resurrection of Jesus. By such a close association with the sacrifice of Jesus, his offering can be fully effective in covering our sins and opening up a way to everlasting life for us all. However, the New Testament makes it very clear that the hope of eternal life is not achievable by a once-off association with Christ through baptism. Baptism is essential, but not sufficient of itself. It marks the beginning of a new life in Christ, a life like that of Jesus, given as an offering to God.

SACRIFICE IN THE CHRISTIAN ERA

Paul wrote to the Romans: *'I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'* [Romans 12.1 RSV] Obviously Paul is not instructing us literally to kill ourselves, but to develop in our own lives the essential characteristics of an offering acceptable to God. In the same chapter of Romans, Paul itemises the characteristics that God finds pleasing - to be charitable, kind, zealous, patient, prayerful, humble, forgiving - indeed the very characteristics that marked Jesus out as the perfect man. Very often, exhibiting these virtues involves us in real sacrifice, a giving of oneself to benefit others.

All men and women are basically selfish, with a primary concern for their own well-being. The Christian way of life should be the reverse; God and Christ must come first, our fellow men and women second and ourselves last. This way of life is contrary to every natural instinct and to develop the right attitude demands a determined disciplining of mind and action. Our brief study of Old Testament examples shows that our approach to such discipline

must not be half-hearted. A token gesture of following Christ is comparable to offering a crippled or lame animal from the flock, an unacceptable response to someone who has given us everything.

At the outset of this article we mentioned parents who make a sacrifice for the benefit of their children. Such a consideration is more than simple analogy; it is a literal expression of what God has done. We are all disobedient, ungrateful and undisciplined children, worthy only of punishment. Yet our Heavenly Father has provided a means of becoming reconciled to Him. This involved the provision of Jesus, who willingly laid down his life as an effective sacrifice for sin. God allowed His only son to be destroyed by wicked hands in order that we might benefit. That benefit is not just a passing fancy or a temporary advantage, it is the supreme blessing of everlasting life to be enjoyed on a beautified earth. This is what the calling of God is - He has shown us His purpose through His Word; He has provided for the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ: but He also demands a response from us:

‘...therefore...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God...’ [*Romans 12.1*]

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Editorial

FOR THOSE OF us who live in countries that have cold winters, the coming of Spring is something to look forward to. We eagerly await the warmer weather and **observe the signs** that show us the nearness of that event. Buds appear on the trees and birds begin to build their nests. In England many gardens and parks come to life with spring flowers including the colourful daffodils which are shown on our cover picture. We are reminded of the words of a famous poet who lived in the English Lake District where this picture was taken:

'I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils...'

(William Wordsworth 1770-1850)

These words tell us of the beauty of the natural world which God has created. However, **observing the changing seasons** does not have any lasting benefit because sooner or later spring and summer are gone and winter is here again. This reminds us of the words of the prophet Daniel who was a Jewish captive living in Babylon. God revealed to him the meaning of the king of Babylon's dream and Daniel said concerning God: *'He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things...'* [Daniel 2.21,22 NIV]

The first article in this Issue concerns Babylon and the reality of these prophetic words. Babylon and its successors were overthrown as God had decreed. The important thing for us is to observe **the signs of our times** and prepare for the day appointed by God when He will intervene in human affairs as foretold by the prophets of Israel. As Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar, that great Babylonian king: *'the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed'* [Daniel 2.44 NIV]

Men of faith in times of change - Joseph

WHAT IS FAITH? In one respect it could be aligned to other virtues that are hard to quantify. For example, hope, love, virtue and affection are all difficult to define but needful for men and women if they are to live a life in accordance with Divine principles. How does faith measure up in you and me in this thrusting, wheeling and dealing society in which many of us live? Come to think of it, where does faith come from - can anyone have it? Like so many attributes of human nature, this intangible aspect of life can play such an important role in an individual's existence. Faith can be weak or strong and is only evident in actions or response. If faith is such an elusive characteristic, is it a matter of chance whether or not it can be of help to you and me?

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

In the New Testament we have recorded the teaching of Jesus on this important subject. The disciples had said to him '*Lord, Increase our faith.*' [Luke 17.5 NIV] Jesus said in reply:

“...If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” [Luke 17.6 NIV]

The illustration of the mustard seed is a powerful one - from tiny beginnings hidden in the soil it will grow into a large plant. In effect, Jesus is telling us that all things are possible if only we have sufficient faith.

This is illustrated in the case of Joseph. He lived with his family in the land of Canaan (now Israel) many hundreds of years before Christ and he was, as the title of this article suggests, a man of faith. He was also to experience great changes in his personal circumstances that would have a far-reaching effect on his family and their descendants. The Joseph we are to consider was to demonstrate in the adverse circumstances of his life this elusive quality of faith. The story of his life is contained within the pages of the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, commencing at chapter 37. In many ways his life parallels that of Christ.

HATED BY HIS BRETHREN

Jacob loved his son Joseph, being the second to youngest of twelve brothers. This natural love of a father for his son only provoked his elder brothers to envy, which eventually turned to hatred and a desire to destroy him. Compare this with the love that existed between God and His son, the Lord Jesus Christ and the reaction of his brethren the Jews. Joseph was indeed a type of Christ and although this is another subject, it is profitable to explore the many parallels, which exist between them.

With this animosity already established between Joseph and his brothers, would we be like Joseph who told them about his incredible dreams, or would we reluctantly stay quiet about them? Joseph decided to tell his brothers about the dreams and their reactions were not unexpected for we read:

‘...his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us?
or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated
him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.’ [Genesis 37.8]

At this point it might be appropriate to mention the opposite of the virtues we referred to at the beginning of the article, for here we have envy, greed and all those base elements that are part of human nature. At this time we should bear in mind that Joseph was only a young man of seventeen, still growing

and learning all the time. From the Bible record it becomes obvious that Joseph was different from his brothers. He was closest to his father and shared Jacob's trust in the Almighty's care and guidance. His faith was going to be sorely tried by subsequent events.

EVENTS AT SHECHEM

The family had settled in the southern part of Canaan, in the valley of Hebron but Jacob was still the owner of a parcel of land just outside Shechem to the north, which with its well to supply water was an ideal place for tending the sheep. So while Joseph stayed in the south with his father, his brothers travelled some 60 miles northwards with the flocks. Joseph appears to have been given the task of maintaining contact between the two family encampments. Genesis chapter 37 describes his traumatic experience at the hands of his brothers. When they saw him in the distance they conspired together how they might kill him.

Joseph did not know as he set out on that peaceful mission, that he was leaving the quiet haven of his father's home for the last time. He would be separated from the family for twenty years and would endure the difficulties and hardships of a life of servitude in a country far from home. His brothers' initial plan was to leave Joseph in a pit. Their evil characters are revealed in the opportunistic way in which they sold Joseph to a company of Ishmaelite merchants travelling from Gilead, taking their cargo of spices down to Egypt.

It is quite reasonable to suppose that Joseph's character began to be formed while he was lying in that pit. It was at this low point in his life that he truly began to grow up. How often it is that in a situation of apparent hopelessness, the best characteristics of a man or woman will reveal themselves as in this instance. There is no condemnation of Joseph for wrong thoughts, speech or actions, prompted by a desire for revenge. Instead, this period of great tribulation engendered a character that was to stand him in good stead later in his life. He may well have thought many dreadful thoughts about certain of his brothers as he was roughly dragged along behind the merchant's camels. Such contemplation took on a more balanced aspect, for in later life Joseph was revealed to be a young man of considerable intelligence.

INTO EGYPT

Had he acted without malice? Had his intentions and motives of telling his brothers of his dreams been pure? We don't know. Now what of his faith in God, a faith that Jacob his father would so often have talked to him about. This faith was now his only hope. Whether or not Joseph was given explicit instructions from God, with respect to his action or reaction to his brothers, we cannot tell. However, with the advantage of hindsight many years later, he was able to see that he had been sent ahead into Egypt for their protection to save them from certain death. By malice and envy he had been torn from his family and placed in awful circumstances, but he trusted in his God not knowing what lay ahead of him. Truly he was an example of a man of faith, as defined in the letter to the Hebrews:



Joseph's brothers pay homage to him

'Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...' [Hebrews 11.1 NIV]

In this situation, Joseph needed faith above all else and this was to be the antidote to the wickedness, malice and envy that he had been subjected to by his brothers. It was a faith in God that shone with the brightness and intensity of a young man who had committed his way to God.

IN THE HOUSE OF POTIPHAR

Upon arrival in Egypt, Joseph's demeanour at the slave market attracted the attention of Potiphar, a high ranking official at Pharaoh's court and we read that *'Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured.'* [Genesis 39.6] At seventeen years old he was a handsome young man, but there was also an air about him that was unusual. Joseph in his service to Potiphar and his household is another example of how men and women of faith should conduct their lives. He served his earthly master to such effect that Potiphar eventually left the organisation of his household completely in Joseph's hands. This was an extraordinary turn of events bearing in mind that Joseph was now a Hebrew slave in the land of Egypt - something not to be desired if you were seeking success in this life! All this adds immensely to his character and his faith. He was convinced that God was on his side and this is what kept him going.

We wonder if Joseph ever tried to communicate with his family while he was in Egypt, although there is no record of this happening. Surely he would have been worrying over his father's grief at having lost his beloved son. (See Genesis 37.34,35) Yet Joseph was to endure even more tribulation and at this juncture we notice the pattern of his trials and the way in which he reacted to them. These testing events that followed in Joseph's life, instead of causing him to become dispirited actually helped him to build a foundation for his faith.

CAST INTO PRISON

Potiphar's wife was the next test for Joseph. Being accused by her of improper behaviour, he was cast into prison for three years and no doubt lived among the dregs of Egyptian society. Surely this was as low as Joseph could sink. As each week and month went past, he still had faith in his God. He was supported by the great gift of understanding dreams, being enabled by the incredible gift of God to foretell some of the future events that lay before him. His explanation of the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners and witnessing their fulfilment, would have given him encouragement, knowing that he had not been forgotten by God. Eventually he was released from prison and within a very short time he came from the depths of despair and was promoted to the most powerful ruler in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. In this way his faith in God was vindicated. The position of second in command enabled him to

organise and control the food distribution in Egypt during a period of severe drought and famine, which extended beyond the borders of Egypt, encompassing the land in which his father and brothers were still living.

This brings us to consider the situation where, had Joseph's character been different and had he been eaten up with dissatisfaction and envy, complaining that he hadn't had a fair deal, things might have turned out so differently. What revenge could have been wreaked upon those who, by force of circumstances were now starving. The family of Jacob had no choice but to go and search for food to sustain them.

CORN IN EGYPT

Jacob had heard that there was corn in Egypt and he instructed Joseph's brothers to go there to buy food for the family. Suddenly Joseph was brought face to face with his brothers once again, as they joined the pathetic queues lining up for a share in Egypt's golden stores of corn. Recognition was immediate on Joseph's part but his brothers had no idea of his identity, for he must have changed a great deal from the young man that they sold twenty years previously. He appeared to them as an Egyptian, in speech and dress.

The scene is set for the dramatic revelation of their long lost brother. What an amazing turn of events as they were forced to bow before this powerful ruler in fear, a man who they found themselves completely dependant on for the food they needed to sustain life. Little did they realise at the time that they were fulfilling the dreams of their younger brother who they had hated so much. (See picture on page 23)

The confusion of the brothers must have been profound. Eventually Joseph could no longer conceal his joy at seeing his family and revealed himself to them with the words *'I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt.'* [Genesis 45.4] His brothers were naturally stunned into silence and Joseph had to repeat his declaration, promising them care and protection in the land of Egypt and finally embracing them all with warm affection. Joseph had to remind them how the purpose of God had been achieved through the course of events, reassuring them with these words:

‘And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.’ [Genesis 45.7,8]

FAITH IN THE DIVINE PROMISES

We can see then that Joseph was a man of faith in times of great change both in his own life and in a changing world. His was a faith that was eventually vindicated and rewarded after enduring many trials and tribulations most of which are beyond the problems we have to contend with. Faith will help us even in dire extremity. Faith says in our hearts ‘Thy will be done’ and although others will jeer at continued obedience to what we know must be done, it is done by faith in what He (God) has promised and we can be assured that His promises will not fail. Between the promises and their fulfilment lies faith. Between the testimony of the Scriptures and the coming again of Christ there is faith. Joseph, along with many men and women in Bible times looked forward in confidence with their faith steadfast and undiminished. Concerning them we are told that *‘these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise:’* [Hebrews 11.39]

The question we asked at the beginning of the article is answered. Joseph’s experiences were the means of helping his own family, of preserving their lives and assisting in the development of the nation of Israel under the control of the Almighty. His life is a great example to us particularly throughout all his trials and tribulations in times of great change. Joseph’s faith in God was unshakeable and will be fully vindicated when the faithful of all ages stand up in the day of resurrection to receive the promise. For we read in the last verse of Hebrews chapter 11:

‘God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.’ [Hebrews 11.40]

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NEWS & Views

IT BELONGS TO ME!

MANY WARS HAVE been fought throughout history over claims to a piece of land or a city. The ancient city of Jerusalem has been fought over and changed hands many times in its history and now once more it is the focus of argument and bloodshed between Israelis and Palestinians. But who does it really belong to?



A view across the modern city of Jerusalem

The Bible view is that Jerusalem belongs to God: 'For the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for his habitation.' [Psalm 132.13 NKJV] It

stands on the site where Abraham prepared to offer Isaac. It is the Salem where Melchizedek the priest of the Most High God ruled.

Whatever we think of the present day rights and wrongs of the fighting over Jerusalem, we must accept the Bible's view, that these things have not come about by chance. It was God who gave the land to Abraham's descendants, the twelve tribes of Israel. It was God who guided Joshua to take the land and settle in it. Jerusalem is on the site of Jebus where King David built his palace and where on Mount Moriah, Solomon built the Temple and where the ark from the tabernacle in the wilderness was brought to rest.

It was God who said to Israel that he would punish them if they failed to keep his commands, *'The LORD shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies...and shalt be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth.'* [Deuteronomy 28.25] The history of the Jewish people shows the fulfilment of Bible prophecy, but it was God who also said they would return, *'But I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back...'* [Jeremiah 23.3 NKJV]

What we are seeing today in modern Israel is God's hand at work! Jerusalem is in the hands of the Jews because God has decreed it! Jesus tells us that, *'Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.'* [Luke 21.24 NKJV] In 1967 the Israeli's took Jerusalem from the Arab occupiers in part fulfilment of this prophecy.

But Jesus also put another viewpoint in that prophecy and that is that these events surrounding Jerusalem would also be a sign of his Second Coming, *'Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.'* [Luke 21.27,28 NKJV]

To those who are looking this is wonderful news indeed.

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